



**Sports  
Illustrated**

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# The Legacy Of Wes Leonard

You may have heard about the Michigan high schooler who made a game-winning basket and then died. Here's the rest of the story: a violent car crash, a bone-shaking tackle, a near-perfect season, a reluctant substitute and a search for the will to carry on.

by *THOMAS LAKE*

After the autopsy, when the doctor found white blossoms of scar tissue on Wes Leonard's heart, he guessed they had been secretly building there for several months. That would mean Wes's heart was slowly breaking throughout the Fennville Blackhawks' 2010-11 regular season, when he led them in scoring and the team won 20 games without a loss.

It would mean his heart was already moving toward electrical meltdown in December, when he scored 26 on Decatur with that big left shoulder clearing a path to the hoop. It would mean his heart swelled and weakened all through January (25 against Hopkins, 33 against Martin) even as it pumped enough blood to fill at least 10 swimming pools.

This heart pounded two million times in February, probably more, heaving under its own weight, propelling Wes's 6'2", 230-pound frame along the glimmering hardwood with such precision and force that finally a kid from Hartford gave up on the rules and tackled him in the lane. By March 3, the night of Wes's last and most glorious game, his heart weighed 21 ounces, double the weight of a normal heart, and it gave him all he needed from the opening tip to the final buzzer. Then the wiring failed, the current going as jagged as a thunderbolt, and Wes fell to the floor with his big heart quivering.

If all this seems implausible—that Wes could play so well for so long with such faulty equipment—consider a scientific phenomenon called functional reserve. The human heart has a reservoir of unused ability, like a powerful car that can go 150 mph but never gets pushed above 75. A normal heart will pump about 60% of its blood volume with each beat. But one cardiologist tells the story of a bodybuilder who thrived for nearly a decade with a heart that could pump only about 10% per beat. Pistol Pete Maravich, arguably the greatest college basketball player of all time, was born with no left coronary artery. His right one worked twice as hard. It kept him alive for 40 years. The body finds a way to compensate, at least for a while. Functional reserve is not just for the heart. Every organ has this hidden power, this ability to outperform its perceived limits when the need is desperate.

Fennville is a blue-collar town in southwestern Michigan, six miles east of Lake Michigan, with a high school gym large enough to fit all of the 1,400 citizens. It nearly did so toward the end of Wes Leonard's junior season, as the Blackhawks won game after game behind his 19-point scoring average. It was the best show in town and, for some, a welcome escape.

Fennville High principal Amber Lugten guessed that in half of her students' families, at least one parent was looking for work. A man not at the game might be at Steven's on Main Street, a good dark place to drink canned domestic lager while pondering his career options now that the old fruit cannery was a shell of its former self and the Life Savers factory had gone to Canada and the welding company had laid him off months earlier. He could risk his last dollars on the Club Keno game playing on the monitor above the bar, watch the red sphere fall like a drop of blood on a grid of 72 numbers, pray for the jackpot. Otherwise he could collect scrap metal to sell by the pound, or ride his bike along the roadside with plastic bags dangling

from the handlebars, filling them with 10-cent aluminum cans, and then ride out to the woods, scavenging deer camps for the relics of drunken hunters. After the summer he might find a job picking apples on the hills outside town, alongside the itinerant Mexicans whose children push Fennville's school enrollment up every March and back down in October, as regular as a heartbeat.

Yes, they've heard of functional reserve in Fennville. Whether by that name or some other.

### 1. THE TWO RIVALS

The key to this story is a boy named Xavier Grigg, who could have been the finest three-sport athlete in Fennville. In 2005 he was not especially tall or strong for an 11-year-old, but he was quick and crafty, with a slingshot arm he'd been developing since his days as a toddler throwing imaginary baseballs. His best sport was baseball, and his third-best was basketball. In the middle was football, which put him on a clear path toward the most exalted position a teenage boy can reach in a small U.S. town: starting varsity quarterback.

Everything changed when Wes Leonard came to Fennville that fall. He was 27 days younger than Xavier but so physically advanced that his mother carried his birth certificate in a ziplock bag in her purse, just to prove he wasn't a ringer. Xavier tried to defend his territory, telling Wes, "I don't care how big you are, I'm gonna beat you," but he couldn't, except maybe in baseball, in which they took turns throwing no-hitters. In basketball and football there was no contest. Wes sharpened his jump shot all winter on a 10-foot goal in the converted garage that adjoined his bedroom. He and his father, Gary, a 6'5" hulk of a man who'd been recruited in football by several Division I universities, used to hurl a football back and forth at top speed, taking a step closer with each throw, to see who would drop it first. If Xavier had a slingshot, then Wes had a cannon. In their youth football leagues Xavier finally accepted the role of backup quarterback, taking snaps only when Wes got hurt and otherwise catching one touchdown after another as Wes's favorite receiver.

Through all this, Wes and Xavier became best friends. Xavier loved the spotlight but hated the pressure that came with it, so he didn't mind handing that pressure off to Wes. More than anything he hated losing, and with Wes on his team he didn't lose much. And Xavier proved his worth in social situations, in which Wes could be painfully insecure. Kids at school saw Wes as a paragon of self-confidence—he made friends with an autistic girl, for example, and sat with her at lunch every day—but he was timid compared with Xavier. When Wes's mother, Jocelyn, dispatched him to the grocery store for fruit juice, he was too shy to ask a clerk for help. When they went shopping at Hollister, Wes sifted through piles of jeans, looking for the pair that would fit comfortably over his muscular legs, and Jocelyn stood in the corner awaiting the hand signal that meant he needed her approval. Wes may have felt invincible on the field and the court, but elsewhere he lived with the irrational fear that someone might discover his incompetence.

"You need me, Wes," Xavier said.

"You need me," Wes said.

"You're just big, and you're good," Xavier said. "I'm good-lookin'."

So it went. Wes put up the big numbers, and Xavier got the phone numbers. They went tanning together to look good for the ladies. When Xavier's uncle took them to Hooters, the waitresses signed Wes's T-shirt with generic inspirational messages. But Xavier played it so smoothly that one waitress wrote to him, I hope all your ups and downs in life are in bed.

The two families had little in common, other than sons who played sports. Gary and Jocelyn Leonard were married, solidly Methodist, with a sprawling house in the woods outside Fennville. Xavier's mother, Maria Flores, had gone to her junior prom six months pregnant with Xavier and now lived in a small house in town with her longtime boyfriend, Jerry Lemmons, probably the nicest man ever to have his forearm tattooed with the devil's face. They all got along fine, though. Gary and Jerry sat together at basketball and football games, talking man talk, while Jocelyn and Maria watched their respective sons from another part of the bleachers, occasionally yelling in maternal fury at spectators whose color commentary cut too deep.

Maria and Xavier hurled mock insults that made everyone laugh. Maria convinced Wes that his mother's spaghetti was no good, and Wes told Maria her dogs were ugly, and if Xavier talked too much trash then Wes wrestled him to the floor and made him take it all back.

In the spring of 2010 Maria broke her neck in a car crash after a drunk driver ran a stop sign. As Jerry and Gary stood over her hospital bed, talking in worried tones, they looked down and saw a hopeful sign: In spite of the drugs and the brain injury Maria was giving them the finger. But she had barely avoided paralysis. Doctors rebuilt her upper spine with a titanium plate and a cadaver bone. She had been a full-time caregiver for the mentally handicapped, and now she needed full-time care herself. She spent most of her days in a four-poster bed, Vicodin no match for the pain in her neck and shoulders; she cried at everything on the Lifetime network, including the commercials. Worst of all, the Leonards took Xavier on a Jet Skiing and parasailing vacation at a cabin near Lake Huron a few weeks after Maria was discharged from the hospital, and Maria had to stay home.

"Xavier!" she called when she heard Wes's car in the driveway late that summer. "Your girlfriend's here."

All three of them got in the little coupe. Wes had a new driver's license and an old burgundy two-door Mitsubishi Eclipse he'd bought with earnings from mowing lawns and digging ditches. And this is who the varsity quarterback invited to ride shotgun: a 33-year-old woman in a neck brace who called his Eclipse a "girl car." He was taking her on a date to the grocery store, with his favorite receiver in the backseat.

## 2. THE ONE-ARMED QUARTERBACK

One hundred seventy-four days before he died, Wes led

the Fennville Blackhawks to Decatur, a neighboring town where the field was packed hard from 55 consecutive years of football. The Decatur Raiders' game plan boiled down to one imperative: Stop Wes Leonard. They did, eventually. On the first play he took the snap and sprinted left for nearly 20 yards, somersaulting in the air as he was tackled, bouncing right back up. He ran well and threw even better, and on any given play it was almost impossible to stop both. Fennville scored twice in the first quarter for a 12--8 lead and lined up for a two-point conversion. The setting sun cast thin blades of shadow. Wes ran around right tackle, one defender to beat, but the guy got him around the ankles and then a 270-pound defensive tackle came from the backside and crushed Wes to the stony ground. When he got up his left arm was hanging limp.

On the sideline, Xavier saw tears in Wes's eyes. Wes asked for something to relieve the pain. Jocelyn went searching for ibuprofen and politely declined when Maria offered her Vicodin. She heard the coach tell Xavier to go in at quarterback, and then she saw Wes push Xavier back.

"You're my receiver," Wes said.

No one knew the extent of the injury because Wes waved the trainer away and refused to take off his shoulder pads. Gary Leonard, an assistant coach, knew his stubborn son well enough to know he might have to tackle Wes to keep him out of the game. The coaches found a compromise: Wes would stay out of the game on defense, where he usually played linebacker, and as quarterback he would try to stay in the pocket.

Jocelyn was crying. This is gonna be a freakin' disaster, she thought. Fennville's one-armed quarterback marched onto the field and fumbled his first snap. Decatur recovered.

Even then, Wes would not step aside for Xavier. Near the end of the second quarter, with Fennville trailing 24--18 and the sky that pale fire between day and night, Wes led his team to the line at the Decatur 43 in a four-receiver shotgun formation. Xavier stood in the slot to the right. The snap came in high, but Wes snared it with both hands, and the pain in his bad arm must have been excruciating as he rolled right and looked downfield. He was 10 yards deep when he hurled the ball, and it whistled nearly 60 yards through the air, arcing down near the goal line. Two defenders strained for it, but Xavier had beaten them both. He squeezed the ball to his chest and fell to the ground in the end zone.

After every possession Gary asked Wes, "Think you'd better get out of there?"

Wes always said, "No way."

Fennville lost 32--26, partly because Wes couldn't play defense or run the ball, but he threw for two touchdowns with one good arm. When he took off his pads the end of his clavicle was sticking up under the skin of his left shoulder.

At the hospital, doctors found severe damage to Wes's left acromioclavicular joint, the part of the shoulder that helps raise the arm. The shoulder hung three or four inches be-



Wes probably had about three minutes. He roared and clenched his fists when the buzzer sounded but did not run or jump like his teammates. Calmly, almost casually, he strolled to midcourt and joined his friends. A small boy jumped to touch his shoulder blades. An older man put a hand on the small of his back. He lined up to shake hands with the other team. The Blackhawks huddled for a brief word from their coach. Two teammates lifted Wes off the floor, and he smiled down at Xavier.

"Great game," Xavier said. He would later say he felt on top of the world right then, even though he'd made no real contribution to the victory. He was Wes Leonard's best friend and fellow Blackhawk, and that was enough.

No one knows why it happened then. One prominent doctor thinks the glorious surge of adrenaline could have pushed Wes's heart to the breaking point. Another insists the circumstances were merely coincidental. The precise timing of sudden cardiac arrest has always been a mystery. Just after Wes's teammates set him down and just before Xavier could wrap him in a hug, Wes's knees buckled. He crashed to the floor.

Xavier felt everything slowing down, his field of vision narrowing. He ran to the bleachers and found Gary and Jocelyn and told them their son was down. Someone got on the public-address system and ordered spectators out of the gym. Coach Klingler took Xavier and the other Blackhawks to the locker room to get them out of the way. One boy cried on the floor in a fetal position. In the visitors' locker room the Bridgman Bees, realizing that something had gone wrong in the gym, stood in a circle and prayed.

Maria saw her son running and hobbled over to join the crowd. The gym had gone quiet. Wes lay gasping for air on the floor, his feet twitching. Gary knelt next to Wes and Jocelyn stood over him. Unsure what else to do, they called out desperate encouragement: "Come on, Wes!" Some people from the crowd with basic medical training thought it was heat exhaustion, so they took off Wes's shoes and socks, opened the doors, cooled him with ice. An emergency-room nurse named Victoria Barnes was cleaning the concessions stand when her husband told her Wes had collapsed. She ran to the gym, checked his pulse and called for the defibrillator. She thought there was still a chance it could shock his heart back into rhythm before it stopped forever.

Amber Lugten, the high school principal, ran out of the gym to an empty office and found the defibrillator in a pile of unused athletic supplies. It had once hung on the wall in a hallway but was put away and nearly forgotten after too many students tampered with the case. Lugten picked it up and ran to the gym, where Barnes applied the pads to Wes's chest and waited for the robotic voice to guide her. But the machine made no sound. The battery was dead.

#### 4. THE SUBSTITUTE

There was silence at first when the coach asked his boys what he had to ask. They were gathered at his house to commiserate over pizza while hiding from the satellite trucks. Wes had been gone less than 48 hours, long enough to draw attention from media around the world,

and now the boys had to decide whether or not they would play on without him.

No, Xavier finally said.

No: Wes was their season. It lived and died with him. They coexisted in perfection. They should be buried together, undisturbed, in a field west of town, by a wall of maples, under a heart-shaped headstone.

No? Let's ask his parents, someone said.

Gary and Jocelyn were mourning in their house with the television off when Coach Klingler came to call.

Yes, Jocelyn said, without hesitation.

Yes: Wes would have wanted them to play. No matter the sport, he always wanted one more game. If he could play football with a busted shoulder and basketball with a double-sized heart, his fellow Blackhawks could play through a few tears.

Xavier and some other players slept at the Leonards' house for the next week or so, up the dogleg hallway from the carpeted garage gym with the indoor hoop where he and Wes used to play in their socks. They spent time with Wes's 13-year-old brother, Mitchell, who played on the Fennville junior high basketball team. Xavier slept all he could, just to turn his mind off, because he knew his days as sixth man were over. It was a simple matter of subtraction. On Monday the boy who wanted to bury the season would replace his best friend in the starting lineup.

If Maria could wait three bone-aching hours in line for tickets at the Hope College field house, afraid of being trampled, begging people not to jostle her, conspiring with her younger son to hustle for a good seat, as if it were the Oklahoma land rush—

If Gary and Jocelyn could show their faces for the television cameras with their 16-year-old son not yet in the ground—

If the Trappist monks of New Melleray Abbey in rural Iowa could build a walnut casket from their own sustainable forest and send it free of charge 365 miles to Fennville in a minivan that drove through the night — If the opposing Lawrence Tigers could look at Wes in that casket one day and still try to beat his team the next — Then maybe Xavier could hold it together.

His stomach churned as he knelt before the scorer's table, waiting to check in as a ceremonial substitute. No matter: Everyone knew he was starting at point guard, just as Wes would have done.

Nine boys stood at midcourt, wiping dust from the soles of their shoes.

The substitution buzzer sounded.

Now entering the game for the Fennville Blackhawks, number 33, Xavier—

Applause drowned out the announcer's voice. Xavier had never heard such a crowd: about 3,500 people, more than double the population of Fennville, most of them screaming

for the Blackhawks.

Xavier looked shaky on the first possession, after Fennville won the tip. He nearly lost the dribble at the top of the key. But after an awkward series of passes he found Pete Alfaro open in the left corner for a three. Fennville 3--0. The crowd roared.

Then, after Lawrence responded with a basket, Xavier was called for carrying the ball. He kept picking up his dribble too soon. He threw a clumsy pass that a defender knocked away. He back-rimmed an open three. He threw another tipped pass. Even as his teammates—Alfaro, Adam Siegel, DeMarcus McGee, Reid Sexton—fought through the grief and played above themselves, Xavier fell apart. He threw a ridiculous one-handed pass from midcourt that was easily stolen by a Lawrence defender. He played lazy defense and let a Lawrence player hit a three in his face. Finally, after Xavier committed a two-shot foul, Coach Klingler mercifully pulled him out.

"I don't wanna play anymore," Xavier said, starting toward the locker room.

The coach grabbed his arm. "If Jocelyn and Gary can be strong for you," he said, "you can be strong for them and stay on the bench."

Xavier sat down and sobbed.

About 15 rows back, where he sat holding his wife, Gary Leonard thought, This was a mistake. Next fall he would work up the courage to attend a Blackhawks football game, in what would have been his son's senior season at quarterback, and make it partway through the national anthem before leaving in a panic to sit in his truck. And then he would come back the next week and find a way to sit through the whole song.

Down on the bench, as the basketball game went on, Coach Klingler put a brawny arm around Xavier. "If you don't wanna go back out there, you don't have to," he said. Xavier lowered his head. The court reflected a grid of searing white lights.

Next to Gary, Jocelyn looked down at Xavier and wished she could hold him in her arms. Letters from other bereaved parents were rolling in. Across America, a trail of enlarged and broken hearts: a football lineman in Nebraska, a wrestler in Oregon, a basketball player in Georgia, a swimmer right there in Michigan, and on and on. Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Ohio. A defibrillator might have saved them, just as it might have saved Wes. Jocelyn blamed herself. She thought she'd been too slow, too indecisive, too uninformed. Well, never again. By summer she would be running a foundation to give schools and sports teams brand-new defibrillators and the training for their proper use. It would be called the Wes Leonard Heart Team. She would carry a defibrillator in her car and stand before group after group of teachers and coaches, showing them how to save lives by showing them how Fennville lost Wes. This is what I did wrong, she would say, the scene playing again and again like a movie in her head.

Maria looked down at her weeping son. When he was three years old, still rubbing her hair between his thumb and forefinger for comfort, Xavier got sick and had to stay

in the hospital for three days. He was kept in a crib that looked like a cage. "Please, Mommy," he kept saying, "take me home." Now, with great effort, Maria stood up. She was going to take him home.

Weeks later, still bedridden on most days, Maria would receive a text message from Jocelyn inviting her to join the Wes Leonard Heart Team. This invitation would be her own defibrillator, the shock to bring her back into rhythm. Still too disabled to hold a regular job, she would make the Heart Team her volunteer occupation. Every day it would give her the strength to get out of bed.

Now, as she prepared to go get Xavier, someone asked her to sit down and give him a few more minutes. She did. The first quarter ended, with Lawrence leading 16--13. The fans chanted about Blackhawk power. They were still in the game for one reason: Siegel and McGee, two of Wes's best friends on the team, were playing like wild beasts.

A young assistant coach named Mike Raak put his arm around Xavier and tried to think of uplifting words. "He's here with you," the coach said. Xavier thought about Wes. They used to play in three-on-three tournaments in which players had to call their own fouls, and Wes never called a foul. It was a matter of principle. "If I can't take the pain, I'll just get out of the game," he'd say. Once the opponents realized they could get away with anything, they would hang on his arms every time he went near the hoop. Still, no call. He desperately wanted to win, but in those games he seemed to want something else even more: proof that he was strong enough to fight through anything.

The second quarter started. Jayson Hicks watched Xavier from across the court. With his paralyzed wife and his nerve disease, Jayson knew a few things about pain. Five years earlier, when the doctor cut off his lower right leg, he declined the epidural so he could get home sooner and see his kids. Now Jayson looked at Xavier and willed him to stand up. It had nothing to do with the final score. Jayson imagined Xavier at age 30, looking back on the biggest moment in his life and wishing he'd fought a little harder.

Xavier sat there, cubical scoreboard flashing above him, 3,500 fans roaring around him, the sneakers of other boys singing like birds on the polished wood at his feet. The burden of perfection was too great.

The Blackhawks would ride an emotional roller coaster for 11 days. They would beat Lawrence and then Bangor and then Covert, reaching the regional semifinals before losing by 24 points to Schoolcraft, the eventual state champion. Xavier would blame himself for failing in a task he never wanted.

That fall, with Wes gone, Xavier would get his chance to be the finest three-sport athlete in Fennville. He would start at quarterback, go down with a shoulder injury, come back as a receiver, and finally quit with one game left in a dismal season. He would join the basketball team late after threatening to quit. Once in a while he would walk into the gym, the last place he saw Wes, and feel on his skin a mild charge of electricity.

But as he sat on the bench in the second quarter with his team trailing by four points to the Lawrence Tigers, Xavier knew none of that. Nor did he know he was about

to play the finest game of the season, with 11 points in the fourth quarter and 18 altogether, or that he'd come back two nights later and pour in 25, or that his playoff scoring average would nearly match the regular-season average of the all-state point guard who at this moment was back in Fennville, in a lonely chapel, surrounded by Trappist-cut walnut, wearing his warmup jacket.

No, Xavier didn't know what was next. What he knew was this: Six minutes remained in the second quarter, and the season was still perfect, and the Blackhawks needed someone to step in for the boy they would bury tomorrow.

Xavier stood up.

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